

A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Students Problems in Communicating Using English

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the psycholinguistic factors that influence junior high school students' ability to communicate in English, focusing on emotional and cognitive barriers that impede speaking performance. While numerous studies have examined speaking difficulties among university students, research on younger learners particularly junior high school students remains limited. This study addresses that gap by exploring the challenges faced by seventh-grade students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with selected students and teachers. The findings reveal that affective factors, such as fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and anxiety, are the most dominant barriers to speaking English. Additional obstacles include overreliance on internal monitoring of grammar, limited vocabulary, and insufficient sentence construction skills. The study also highlights the importance of a supportive learning environment: strategies such as relaxed classroom settings, the use of engaging media like songs, and teacher encouragement were found to reduce psychological resistance and enhance students' willingness to speak. These insights have practical implications for English language teaching, particularly in developing approaches that address emotional as well as linguistic challenges in early-stage language learners.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics; Speaking Ability; English Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a fundamental aspect of human communication, enabling individuals to express thoughts, share ideas, and convey emotions. Language serves as a primary tool for interaction, facilitating the exchange of meaning between people (Riadil, 2020). Among the many languages spoken globally, English has become the dominant medium for international communication, playing a vital role in education, commerce, and diplomacy (Zuparova, Shegay, & Orazova, 2020). As such, the ability to communicate effectively in English is now considered essential, particularly for learners aiming to participate in global discourse.

Despite the widespread teaching of English across Indonesian educational levels—from junior high school to university many students continue to struggle with speaking fluently and confidently (Febriana, Burhansyah, Marhaban, & Bahri, 2024). These challenges stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from psychological barriers that hinder language performance (Franscy & Ramli, 2022; Pratiwi & Andriani, 2021). Psycholinguistics, a field concerned with the psychological and neurological aspects of language processing, provides a valuable framework for understanding these issues (Rosmanti & Rukiyah, 2023).

A growing body of research highlights a range of factors that contribute to speaking difficulties. These include limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, lack of speaking partners, rigid teaching methods, and most critically, emotional issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of making mistakes (Zulfitri, 2019; Nasution & Daulay, 2023). For instance, Nasution and Daulay (2023) reported that female students in Islamic boarding schools frequently experience anxiety and fear of ridicule when speaking English. Similarly, Buansari, Pangestu, and Habibah (2023) found that foreign language anxiety often prevents active participation in classroom interactions. Aras, Hamid, and Mannong (2022) further emphasized nervousness and low self-confidence among university students during English-speaking tasks.

Dewi et al. (2024) identified four dominant psychological obstacles: anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of errors, and low motivation. Tran and Tran (2020) echoed these findings, observing that fear of negative feedback and peer judgment often suppress students' willingness to speak. These recurring themes signal a deeper, more persistent problem beyond mere linguistic competence.

Stephen Krashen's (2007) second language acquisition theory provides insight into how emotional and cognitive barriers affect language learning.

His five hypotheses—Acquisition-Learning, Monitor, Natural Order, Input, and Affective Filter—illustrate the complexity of acquiring a second language. For instance, the Monitor Hypothesis explains how excessive self-correction can hinder spontaneous speech, while the Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that anxiety and low motivation block language input and output.

Despite these established frameworks, most existing studies have focused on adult or university-level learners. Little attention has been given to junior high school students who, due to their developmental stage, may face different psychological and cognitive challenges. This lack of attention presents a clear research gap. It is both urgent and necessary to investigate the psycholinguistic barriers faced by younger learners, who are at a critical stage in their language development but often overlooked in academic research.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the psychological and linguistic challenges that hinder English-speaking performance among seventh-grade students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. Specifically, this research aims to identify the most dominant psycholinguistic factor influencing students' English communication skills and to analyze how these psycholinguistic factors contribute to students' difficulties in speaking English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective communication in a second language, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, has long been recognized as a multifaceted challenge influenced by both linguistic and psychological factors. In junior high school contexts, these challenges are further compounded by developmental, social, and educational pressures. As such, a psycholinguistic approach offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the difficulties students face when attempting to communicate in English.

According to Krashen's (2007) second language acquisition theory, five hypotheses provide insight into the interplay between learning environments and learners' psychological states. The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis differentiates between unconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning. Students who rely heavily on memorized rules and vocabulary often find themselves unable to communicate naturally. The Monitor Hypothesis explains that excessive self-correction can hinder fluency, particularly when students fear making grammatical

errors. This is commonly observed among junior high school students, who may lack confidence and fear negative evaluation (Tran & Tran, 2020).

The Natural Order Hypothesis posits that language structures are acquired in a predictable order, regardless of how they are taught. When classroom instruction deviates from this natural order, students may struggle to internalize the language, leading to confusion and hesitation in speech. The Input Hypothesis emphasizes the necessity of comprehensible input just beyond the learners' current abilities ($i+1$), which is often inadequate in traditional classroom settings. Lastly, the Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights how emotional variables—such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation—can act as barriers to language acquisition and performance (Krashen, 2007).

Several studies support the idea that psychological factors significantly affect EFL learners' speaking ability. Buansari et al. (2023) found that foreign language speaking anxiety was prevalent among international students and could be reduced through social support and encouraging classroom interactions. Similarly, Aras et al. (2022) revealed that third-semester university students experienced anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of peer judgment when speaking in English—factors likely to be more intense for younger learners.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Holmes (1992) and Hymes (1972) emphasize that language is not only a cognitive process but also a social act. Students' hesitation to speak English may stem from social fears, such as being corrected or laughed at by peers, especially in environments that lack supportive speaking practice. Nasution and Daulay (2023), in their study at an Islamic boarding school, reported that female students avoided speaking English due to fear of ridicule and mispronunciation. This aligns with Zulfitri's (2019) findings, which identified vocabulary limitations, pronunciation issues, and difficulty finding speaking partners as key obstacles.

Moreover, research in the Indonesian EFL context reveals persistent issues in English oral communication despite years of formal instruction. Febriana et al. (2024) emphasized that although English is a compulsory subject, many students remain unable to use it effectively in real-life communication. This is partly attributed to the overemphasis on grammar and writing skills, with less attention given to oral language development. Fachriyah (2017) noted that code-switching is often used by students in classrooms to fill lexical gaps and ease the strain of expressing complex ideas in English, showing an adaptive strategy to cope with linguistic limitations.

Additionally, Pratiwi and Andriani (2021) argue that communication challenges among junior high school students stem not only from linguistic deficits but also from cognitive overload and psychological stress. Their research aligns with Slobin's psycholinguistic model (in Rosmanti & Rukiyah, 2023), which explains that language production is influenced by mental processing limitations, especially in learners with underdeveloped vocabulary and syntactic structures.

While much of the existing research focuses on university or adult learners, studies targeting junior high school students remain limited. However, it is evident from the available literature that younger learners are not immune to the same psycholinguistic challenges—*anxiety, fear of mistakes, lack of vocabulary, and limited speaking practice*. This underscores the need for targeted research that explores how Krashen's hypotheses manifest in younger EFL learners and how educators can adapt their teaching strategies to address these barriers effectively.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore and describe the psycholinguistic factors affecting students' communication in English. Qualitative research, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2017), aims to understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem, and is appropriate for investigating the psychological and linguistic barriers students experience in speaking English. The study was conducted at SMP Swasta Nasrani 5 Medan, focusing on a sample of 27 students from Class 7. These participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they are in the early stages of English language learning and were considered suitable for identifying communication challenges and their underlying causes due to their limited experience and exposure to English speaking activities.

Instruments and Procedures

To collect data, the researcher employed observation, interviews, and documentation as the main instruments. Observations were used to examine students' behavior and interaction patterns during English lessons. The researcher paid close attention to how students responded in class, their willingness to speak, and their interactions with peers and teachers. This phase took place throughout April 2025 and continued until sufficient data were collected. Interviews were also conducted to gain

deeper insights into the students' thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences regarding their difficulties in communicating in English. Students who exhibited signs of communication challenges during observation were selected for interviews. The instruments used to facilitate this data collection included a cellphone (for recording interviews), interview guidelines (to ensure consistency and structure in the interview process), and the researcher themselves, who served as the key instrument in qualitative inquiry.

To enhance the credibility of the data, triangulation was applied. The study utilized theoretical triangulation, where relevant psycholinguistic and second language acquisition theories—such as Krashen's five hypotheses—were used to support data interpretation. Additionally, peer triangulation was conducted by interviewing English teachers to gain their perspectives on student communication difficulties and the strategies they employed to address them.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method, which involved interpreting observations, interview transcripts, and documentation without relying on numerical analysis. Data were organized thematically according to the psycholinguistic components—namely psychological and linguistic factors—identified in the students' responses and behaviors. Through an inductive process, the researcher identified recurring themes and patterns that aligned with theoretical frameworks and previous research. All findings were documented in the form of manuscripts, field notes, interview transcripts, and memo notes, allowing for a rich and detailed description of the students' challenges in communicating in English.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Psycholinguistic Factors Influencing Students' English Communication

The findings of this study reveal that several psycholinguistic factors significantly influence students' ability to communicate using English at SMP Swasta Nasrani 5 Medan. The most dominant factor observed is the Affective Filter, which includes emotional aspects such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and embarrassment. Although many students were able to understand the questions posed by the teacher during lessons, only a few were willing to respond. Most students chose to remain silent or responded in very low voices due to fear of mispronunciation or being ridiculed.

Teachers confirmed that students with low self-confidence were often passive and required more encouragement to speak.

Interviews with students supported this finding. Students expressed fear of being laughed at by their peers when making mistakes, which caused reluctance to speak. Statements such as “I feel afraid when I have to speak English, for fear of being ridiculed by friends,” and “I feel embarrassed if I make mistakes,” were frequently mentioned. Students also reported that they often focused too much on grammar rules before speaking, which affected the spontaneity of their communication. One student stated, “I prefer to think first before speaking, because I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes,” and another said, “I like to correct my sentences when speaking.”

Another factor that emerged was limited vocabulary, which made it difficult for students to fully express their thoughts. According to the teacher, students often struggled with memorizing new vocabulary and showed little willingness to do so. As a result, their ability to form and deliver complete responses was restricted.

In response to these challenges, teachers attempted to create a relaxed and supportive classroom environment. They used empathy, light humor, and motivation to reduce students’ fear of speaking. Teachers also encouraged students to speak without fear of being wrong, emphasizing that mistakes are part of the learning process.

Reasons Why Psycholinguistic Factors Affect Communication Difficulties

The analysis showed that the communication difficulties students experienced were largely the result of the interaction between emotional, cognitive, and learning environment factors. High levels of anxiety and fear of negative evaluation led students to avoid speaking, even when they understood the material. The fear of ridicule and making mistakes made students reluctant to try, thus reducing their opportunities to practice and develop their speaking skills.

The monitoring of grammar also played a significant role. Students reported that they often mentally reviewed their sentences for grammatical accuracy before speaking. This process slowed down their speech and made communication less spontaneous. In many cases, it caused students to stop mid-sentence or avoid speaking altogether.

Vocabulary limitation further hindered communication. Students with a limited vocabulary were unable to articulate complete responses or express ideas freely. Consequently, they resorted to short and simple sentences, avoiding complex structures or unfamiliar words.

The learning environment also had a notable influence. A classroom setting that felt too formal or lacked encouragement contributed to communication barriers. Teachers recognized this and implemented strategies to create a more relaxed, family-like classroom atmosphere. They used supportive feedback and encouraged students to speak freely, even when their grammar was imperfect. These strategies were aimed at building students' confidence and reducing their fear of speaking English.

To better understand how psycholinguistic factors influence students' communication skills in English, this study analyzed the findings through the lens of Stephen Krashen's second language acquisition theory. Based on classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers, several key themes emerged. Each of Krashen's five hypotheses Affective Filter, Monitor, Natural Order, Input, and Acquisition-Learning was found to play a significant role in shaping how students interact, process, and produce spoken English. The table below summarizes these findings and explains how each factor contributes to students' communication challenges and abilities.

Krashen's hypothesis	Research Findings	Influence on students' communication skills
Affective Filter Hypothesis	<p>Students understand the question / material but only choose silence, a quiet voice, because students are afraid of being wrong, embarrassed, and afraid of being ridiculed. "I am embarrassed if I make a mistake" "I am afraid if I am wrong when speaking English, I will be ridiculed"</p> <p>And the teacher overcomes this by creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, and also provides support to students "teaching is not too strict, relaxed and full of family so it is not rigid to be silent, let them speak" definitely provide support, give direction to them that speaking wrong is not to be</p>	<p>This makes students reluctant to speak even if they understand, and also the opportunity for students to speak becomes limited because they are afraid if they make mistakes.</p>

	afraid, because it can be corrected if it is wrong.	
Monitor Hypotesis	Students think first before speaking, students like to correct their own sentences and first make sure that the sentence is correct “I think first, and must be sure the sentence is correct” And the teacher overcomes this by “giving students the opportunity so that they just say it even though it is wrong, later it can be corrected”	This causes students' communication to be not spontaneous and also makes students hesitate when speaking English.
Natural Hypotesis	Students find it easier to use short sentences, focusing on grammar “I prefer to use short sentences rather than long ones” “I am still confused when it comes to grammar” And the teacher overcomes this by “giving them an explanation first and then giving exercises”.	Students are only able to use simple sentences, communication is less varied
Input Hypotesis	Students prefer to learn new vocabulary through songs and understand if the input is interesting “I prefer to learn from songs because the lyrics are repeated” And the teacher also said “using media such as songs makes it easier for students to understand”.	Input that is slightly higher than the student's ability (i+1) can still be well understood if presented through attractive media.
Acquisition-Learning Hypotesis	Students find it easier to acquire language naturally by listening to songs where they can acquire new vocabulary naturally. They also prefer to learn English by practicing speaking rather than from books. And the teacher stated that “giving equal learning between speaking and structure is also necessary, because in making sentences they must know the structure of the language”.	Learning is more effective if it is done with fun than formal learning.

The results of this study affirm that junior high school students' English-speaking abilities are significantly influenced by psycholinguistic factors, consistent with Stephen Krashen's five hypotheses. While these findings align with prior research, this study adds depth by highlighting how these barriers uniquely manifest among younger learners, who are at a formative stage of both language development and emotional maturity.

One of the most dominant findings was the impact of emotional barriers, particularly fear, embarrassment, and anxiety. This supports previous research by Buansari et al. (2023), who found that language anxiety can reduce student participation in English speaking activities. However, while Buansari et al. focused on university-level students, this study shows that junior high school students experience these emotions more intensely and more frequently avoid speaking altogether, even when they comprehend the material. This suggests that younger learners require more structured emotional support and confidence-building strategies in language classrooms.

Similarly, the effect of internal monitoring aligns with Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis and the findings of Pratiwi and Andriani (2021), who observed that students often hesitate due to fear of making grammatical errors. While this pattern is present in both age groups, this study found that younger students were more likely to pause or remain silent entirely, suggesting a lower tolerance for perceived failure compared to older learners, who may attempt to speak despite grammatical uncertainty.

From a linguistic standpoint, the study found that students relied heavily on short, simple sentences due to limited vocabulary and sentence structure awareness. This finding mirrors Zulfetri's (2019) research, which also identified vocabulary limitations and pronunciation issues among university students. However, the present study contributes a novel insight by demonstrating that junior high students often lack the metacognitive strategies, such as code-switching or circumlocution, that older students use to navigate these limitations. As a result, they tend to withdraw from speaking altogether, reinforcing the need for early scaffolding in vocabulary and sentence construction.

Regarding input, this study reinforces the effectiveness of media-based instruction, especially through songs a finding echoed in Riadil (2020), who noted that repetition in song lyrics enhances vocabulary retention. However, this study reveals that younger learners particularly benefit from such input because it reduces affective stress while maintaining engagement, making language acquisition more intuitive and enjoyable. In addition, the study confirmed students' preference for natural language acquisition over formal instruction, supporting Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis. Unlike the findings of Febriana et al. (2024), which focused on classroom anxiety due to an overemphasis on writing and grammar, this research highlights that young learners are more responsive to interactive, spoken practice and show more enthusiasm when learning is embedded in meaningful and enjoyable contexts.

Finally, consistent with Nasution and Daulay (2023), this study found that teacher support plays a vital role in helping students overcome their fears. However, the current study expands on this by emphasizing that teachers who adopt a relaxed and family-like classroom environment significantly lower students' affective filters, a point not sufficiently explored in earlier works. The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications. First, English language instruction for junior high school students should prioritize emotional safety, allowing students to make mistakes without fear of ridicule. Second, instruction should integrate authentic and engaging input, such as songs and media, to support vocabulary development and retention. Third, teachers should encourage risk-taking in speaking by focusing less on grammatical precision and more on fluency and expression.

However, this study also has limitations. The sample was limited to one class in a single school, which may not fully represent the diverse educational and socio-cultural contexts of Indonesian junior high students. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study means findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized without caution. Future research should consider broader, multi-site studies and possibly integrate quantitative methods to support generalizability and further explore age-specific differences in psycholinguistic barriers in more formal learning settings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the primary psycholinguistic factors hindering students' ability to communicate in English are emotional barriers such as fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and anxiety about being ridiculed by peers. These affective challenges often cause students to remain silent, even when they understand the material. Teachers also confirmed that low self-confidence was a major obstacle to student participation in speaking activities. In addition to emotional factors, linguistic limitations such as restricted vocabulary and weak grammatical understanding further impede students' ability to express ideas clearly and fluently. These findings suggest that students' cognitive language processing is still in the early stages, and many lack the motivation or strategies to enhance their vocabulary independently, making verbal communication in English more difficult.

This research contributes to the field by offering insights into the specific psycholinguistic challenges faced by junior high school students—an age group that has been relatively underexplored in existing studies. It

highlights the importance of early intervention to support language development at the onset of formal English instruction. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. For teachers, it is important to create a safe, supportive, and engaging classroom environment that reduces anxiety and encourages risk-taking in speaking. Teachers should prioritize fluency and confidence over grammatical perfection, and incorporate fun, student-centered learning tools such as songs, games, and media. For policymakers, curriculum designs should place greater emphasis on oral communication from an early stage, with training provided for teachers on managing affective factors in language learning. For future researchers, expanding this study across different schools and regions with diverse student populations would provide a broader understanding of psycholinguistic challenges and help develop more targeted interventions.

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